

Rafflesia arnoldii

[Synonyms : *Rafflesia titan*]

MONSTER PLANT is a very large parasitic, brownish-red mottled with brownish-yellow fungus-like growth (or ‘flower’). Native to Indonesia and Malaysia it has thick petal-like flaps, surrounding a large deep bowl with a wide overhanging rim.

It is also known as *Bunga bangkai* (Malay).

The flower opens for 4 days, can weigh up to 20 lb. and has a penetrating carrion-like smell that attracts pollinating flies. It then disintegrates to a slimy mess embedded with thousands of tiny seeds that are dispersed by animals. The seeds, dropped on a suitable host, penetrate the bark and develop eventually into a bud that pushes its way through the bark. (Some plant collectors have claimed that the buds open explosively when they bloom.)

Over-collection of the buds has threatened the plant and parts of the Malaysian forests are now designated special national reserves in order to provide the necessary protection.

Arnoldii commemorates an English surgeon and naturalist, Joseph Arnold (1782-1818), who joined Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles (1781-1826) in Bengkulu (south-western Indonesian Sumatra, then called Bencoolen) as naturalist and discovered monster plant in 1818. He served as a Royal Naval surgeon from 1808 to 1816 and in the last year sailed out to Australia as the first surgeon-superintendent of a female convictship. On his return journey he was stranded in Java when his ship home caught fire and he lost some of his journals and insect collections from South America, Australia and the Sunda Strait – but he met Raffles who, when Arnold resumed his journey in 1816, gave him an introduction to Sir Joseph Banks (1744-1820). In England Banks offered him the Sumatran naturalist appointment and, after preparatory study, he returned to Sumatra in 1818. He collected many shells and fossil specimens, as well as discovering the monster plant (with, some say the help of an Indonesian guide) in an expedition into the interior, after which he died out there from fever. He was a Fellow of the Linnean Society to which he left his shell and fossil collection.

Authorities note that this is one of the largest known flowers.

The buds are sought after locally as an aphrodisiac. The wives of hunters from the Kelantan state of the Malayan Federation steep the sliced buds in water overnight to give to their husbands the following morning.

Monster plant is one of the three national flowers of Indonesia with butterfly orchid (*Phalaenopsis amabilis*) and Arabian jasmine (*Jasminum sambac*).

Medicinally, local treatments have used monster plant’s juices for easing childbirth pains.